



## **BLACK SUN**

THE BRIEF TRANSIT  
AND VIOLENT ECLIPSE OF  
HARRY CROSBY

**GEOFFREY WOLFF**

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WITH AN AFTERWORD  
BY THE AUTHOR

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS  
CLASSICS

## BLACK SUN

GEOFFREY WOLFF is the author of three other works of nonfiction—*The Art of Burning Bridges: A Life of John O'Hara*; *The Duke of Deception*, a memoir; and *A Day at the Beach*, a collection of personal essays—as well as six novels, most recently *The Age of Consent*. In 1994 he received the Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Mr. Wolff is the director of the graduate fiction program at the University of California, Irvine.

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*New York*

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# Minor Lives

AFTERWORD TO THE 2003 EDITION

“It’s interesting—things that are interesting interest me.” In *Black Sun*, I judged Harry Crosby’s mother’s declaration to be “scatterbrained.” Now I’m not so sure. Shortly before the publication of that book in 1976, I heard from a writer to whom I had sent a complimentary copy. He was generous with praise, but closed with a question friends and reviewers have asked many times since: “Why Crosby?” He even essayed, in a friendly way, to answer it: “Probably he was all that was left over.”

The gunshots had briefly inspired flamboyant publicity; the grisly theater of murder/suicide played the tabloids for a few days, and then citizens turned their attentions elsewhere. Crosby’s widow fueled, without much success, the legend of her husband; Malcolm Cowley brought Crosby onstage to drop the curtain on *Exile’s Return*. But otherwise Harry Crosby—his life, work and death—endured in the world’s memory as a mere footnote to the cultural history of Americans in Paris in the Twenties.

I learned about Crosby from Cowley’s narrative fifteen years before I began to write about him. Simply: his story stuck in my mind. I searched libraries for more about Crosby, and something by him. I found his poems in rare-book rooms, and didn’t like them. As little as I liked them, however, there was something about their badness—energy, will, a breathtaking ignorance of literary conceit—that also stuck in my mind. I found his journals, *Shadows of the Sun*, and was struck by their consistent, even obsessive, vision: Crosby lived every

minute as though it were his last. He was reckless, indifferent to consequence. He was not brave; a brave man overcomes fear. He was fearless. He announced again and again, from the time he was twenty-two, that he would kill himself, choose his own means and moment to leave the table before he was full. He was a phenomenon, not exemplary. Cancer might be regarded as exemplary, while a lightning strike is phenomenal. Crosby was like a lightning strike, and he interested me.

The reviews of *Black Sun* were mostly magnanimous, but the reviewer for *Time* magazine justly observed that since I regarded Crosby as “unique, he was not a proper symbol of anything.” From this simple enough declaration, the reviewer extrapolated a question: “What then is the point of inflating an interesting footnote to the dimensions of a sizable book? The answer, certainly, is gossip.” *The New Republic*, having judged *Black Sun* “an elegant book,” concluded in the same sentence that it was a “pointless and disappointing one. Geoffrey Wolff doesn’t claim anything for Harry Crosby; he knows . . . that his life was neither Art nor artful.” Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, in *The New York Times*, felt cheated: “In the end, we are somewhat disappointed. One is not especially uplifted to have enjoyed a three-ring circus of scandal and antisocial behavior. . . . And though Mr. Wolff skillfully dismantles Malcolm Cowley’s thesis that Harry Crosby’s life and death were paradigmatic of the so-called Lost Generation . . . he doesn’t offer much by way of explanation to replace it.” When the book appeared in England it was reviewed by prominent people in prominent media at considerable length. After detailing the scandalous, glamorous and sensational character of Crosby’s life and death, the reviewer would typically ask: Who could care about such a man? Who would *write* about such a man?

(During my senior year as an undergraduate, a pal and I sat in the dark, day after spring day, watching *American Bandstand*. Outside it was warm and sunny, and we sat watching with the windows shut and the curtains drawn. One afternoon I said to my friend, “Good God, what a way to put in hours!” I was speaking of course of the rock ‘n’ rollers. I felt my friend look at the back of my neck. He said, “Yeah.”)

So why Harry Crosby? *It’s interesting—things that are interesting interest me*. It seemed to me in 1971 when I began working on this biography that any story that had stuck to my memory for fifteen years was trying to tell me something. Too, there was an unexplained mystery about his suicide: Why did he kill himself, healthy, wealthy, happily married, in love and loved back, young? Why didn’t he leave a note? Did he murder the woman he shot, or did she choose to die with him?

I did not know the answers to any of these questions and was eager to find them out.

I understood when I began that I would not introduce to the world a great lost poet, or even a good one. I knew also that I was distrustful of theses, that everything in my experience ran counter to the generalizing impulse. I hoped, when I was done with Crosby, to understand a man, not to have unriddled the secret of Man. I hoped also to bring news, as the word *news* is kin to *novel*. I had written three novels when I began *Black Sun*, and had an affection for the novelist's control of his world, the sense of a world poised to be made up whole and shaped. I believed when I began *Black Sun* that such control was Crosby's principle ambition, and the most consequential fact of his life: he sought to make himself over and up. He determined to translate himself from a Boston banker into a Great Poet by the agency of Genius. Genius he calculated to attain by the agency of Madness. He was purely without a sense of metaphor, so that he willynilly enacted rather than imagined his progress from Harvard boy to surrealist. He *did* what gifted poets write. Thus, for him, suicide was neither an idea nor a figure of speech; it was a bullet in his head.

Harry Crosby was the willing prisoner of his announcement that he would control his end, die when and as he chose. The biographer is, of course, the prisoner of his subject's facts. For a biographer like myself, more responsive to narrative design than to archival duty, the facts of certain kinds of lives are impediments. Let's pretend for a moment that *minor* and *major* accurately describe a distinction between human beings and their works: what kind of book can be written of a man or woman who has written major poems and lived a minor (would this modifier suggest *uneventful? serene? within the law? with moderate use of alcohol and non-prescription drugs?*) life, or died a minor death (*not in war, or in the fiery crash of an automobile, or if in a fiery crash not while driving an Italian or German roadster whose top could be lowered, or by gunshot?*). Surely, in such an instance, the subject's work is what matters. The subject has subsumed and shaped in work the mess of life. In Crosby's case his life stood as so much material, so much documented material, and I was left with what seemed to me the enviable task of making something from it. Harry Crosby walked the earth thinking of himself as a major poet in the making. He looked forward to the judgment of posterity, and made that judgment easily accessible by saving every scrap of paper that memorialized his vagrant scribbles. But however lunatic his calculated instruction book for readers better to understand him, when he shot himself he left no note, wisely apprehending that whatever paltry and

infelicitous message such a note gave the world would be the last word the world would take from him. By not leaving a note, by leaving everything else—letters, notebooks, variants of poems, diaries, receipts, guest books, photographs, scrapbooks, report cards, passports—he seemed to invite such a history as I tried to write, such a collaboration.

*Black Sun* is indeed gossip, insofar as gossip is narrative. Some gossip is unsubstantiated, and some gossip is true. The gossip in *Black Sun* is substantiated hearsay. Like any biographer, I have passed along other people's mail, trafficked in rumor, eavesdropped on the conversations Crosby recorded in his notebooks, pried into school and college transcripts, gossiped with his surviving friends and relatives about him. I did this not because I labored under the delusion that Crosby was exemplary of good poets (or even bad poets, though I might have made a case for the symptoms he shared with other bad poets of his age). I never thought of him as standing for Harvard or Boston or Paris or the Twenties or exiles or philanderers or gamblers or ambulance drivers. I was from the beginning less drawn to his superficial similarities with his fellow men than to his elemental differences. I assumed those differences and left it to readers, whom I cannot pretend to know with such intimacy as I know Crosby and myself, to discover likenesses between Crosby's case and their own.

W. H. Auden's pugnacious essay about autobiography, "Hic et Ille," addresses the question of the unique case, the hermetic life. Midway through a progression of aphorisms, Auden's temper snaps: "Literary confessors are contemptible, like beggars who exhibit their sores for money, but not so contemptible as the public that buys their books." Calming himself somewhat, he quotes Cesare Pavese, putting him in italics: "*One ceases to be a child when one realizes that telling one's trouble does not make it any better.*" (Pavese, like Crosby, ceased to breathe when he ceased telling his trouble; their suicides were not their last, best pieces of work, they were evidence that there was no work left in them.) Auden's case against the literature of the single personality, the kind of story that *Black Sun* means to be, builds to this heartfelt dogma: "Our sufferings and weaknesses, in so far as they are personal, *our* sufferings, *our* weaknesses, are of no literary interest whatsoever. They are only interesting in so far as we can see them as typical of the human condition. A suffering, a weakness, which cannot be expressed as an aphorism should not be mentioned."

Now, here's a surface to press against! I freely confess that I never calculated Crosby's confessions, as I articulated them, to incline toward the aphoristic, to build toward some generalizing trope, some "thesis"

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such as Lehmann-Haupt of the *Times* yearned to have in place of Malcolm Cowley's. It has been my experience as a reader that a strategy of connection and generalization is bound to fail. In fiction it produces flat characters, types whose accessories and quirks are designed only to reinforce conventional wisdom. As artless as the aphoristic impulse may be in fiction, in biography it is inhumane, filing the burred edges, the *interesting* burred edges, from a subject in order to fit him smoothly to the shape of other characters of his "type," to slip him like a greased key into the lock of received expectation. And in autobiography the impulse to generalize the writer's personal case is an unpardonable presumption: I cannot presume to know what experiences I share with you. If we share none, I can be certain you will find little of interest in my history, but I cannot design *my* history to satisfy my notion of *your* deepest yearnings.

These questions are not concluded in the purity of a vacuum, of course. Empirical data condition the biographer's apprehensions. When I told people in conversation about Harry Crosby—what he did rather than what he stood for—people seemed interested. As morally repugnant as this may be, it seems that his suicide authenticated his life. It is awful to watch someone with good eyesight and all his senses on full alert walk with gravity and determination toward the edge of a precipice, and keep going. Had Crosby stopped at the edge, peered down, turned around and died in bed at eighty, I would not have written a book about him. I'm troubled by this fact; it is ghoulish, but I don't pretend not to understand it. My preoccupation, for better or worse, was with narrative, and without Crosby's suicide his narrative would have been shapeless, pointless.

I run counter in this assertion to the conventions of biography. The authentic biographer is above all a writer who receives facts and bravely accommodates them. If the biographer's subject writes a great book or passes a great law at the age of twenty-four, and thereafter lives a life of dwindling vision and intensity, dying at ninety-four, following ten years of senility, well, there you are, that's life, that's death. Crosby gave me a pretty arc, a life lived flat out, a death chosen as a fitting climax. Because he calculated his death's effects, I was left to judge the act's aesthetic value as well as its moral horror, and welcomed the occasion to pipe up about something that interests me deeply. Harry Crosby noted with approval the opinion of William James that when a man takes his own life "the fact consecrates him forever. Inferior to ourselves in this

way or that, if yet we cling to life, and he is able to 'fling it away like a flower' as caring nothing for it, we account him in the deepest way our born superior."

That is, the question of suicide is interesting. Camus said, and I agreed when I embarked on this book, that there is no question more interesting. And because Crosby's was uncomplicated by bad health, alcoholism, unrequited love, unpaid bills, old age or a disappointing Christmas, his suicide seemed on the face of it worth thinking and writing about.

Critics have distinguished between the Romantic and Augustan conventions in biography and autobiography. The Augustan impulse is exemplary (though not, probably, as Auden would have understood the term): it is a memoir in two boxed volumes by a statesman, or a biography of a major author. It inclines toward the archival, the archaeological. Joseph Blotner's *Faulkner: A Biography* (1974) is such an Augustan labor. William Gass has called this a "massive Egyptian work...not so much a monument to a supremely gifted writer as it is the great man's grave itself, down which the biographer's piously gathered data drops like sheltering dirt..." Gass has imagined the subject of such biography, a fellow named Feaster, whom he addresses, warning what the future will make of him: "It would mount in a museum your high school ring, wonder at your watch, your St. Christopher medal; and then your body, from dental crown and crew cut to appendix scar and circumcision, would become, as all enduring human matter does, abstract and general; you would not be a member any longer, but a species, a measure like the meter bar in Paris."

The Romantic convention celebrates the member rather than the species, investigates the particular case. It is fundamentally autobiographical, and for better or worse my own work—I confess!—has tended toward it. During the editing process of *Black Sun*, about a man who died eight years before I was born, I was told many times, too many times, that my book had "too much Geoffrey Wolff in it." To the extent that the biographer's voice derails *his* narrative, or bullies his subject into submission, the biographer has botched his work. But to deny biography the signature of a style, the sound of a single voice rather than the crowd noise of the species Biographer, seems perverse, artless and servile.

Leon Edel has written that the art of biography "lies in the telling; and the telling must be of such a nature as to leave the material unal-

tered.” I’m not certain that any telling can leave material unaltered; point of view alters data, dogma deforms it, and putative objectivity (the absence of a point of view) confuses it. The best the biographer can hope for is what Lytton Strachey demanded of himself, that he “. . . lay bare the facts of his case, as he understands them.”

Where are the facts of a “minor” case to come from? To ask this question in 2003 would be risible. Google them, fool! Nexis the details and Bob’s your uncle! In the dark ages of 1971 one pretended to be a sleuth. Expecting to learn about Crosby in Paris, among his surviving contemporaries, I took my case to France, and enjoyed France, but I learned nothing there about the man I had promised my publisher I would write about. I returned to America chastened, and anxious. A book titled *American Literary Manuscripts* listing major holdings of letters and manuscripts by our libraries directed me to the New York Public Library, which in fact had no Crosby papers, and to Brown University, which did. At Brown were some letters and photographs, and many volumes of notebooks, the raw material from which *Shadows of the Sun* was formed.

At Brown I learned that huge numbers of papers belonging to Crosby’s widow Caresse had been purchased by Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, and these I was allowed to examine during several week-long visits. Here were letters to Crosby from D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Archibald MacLeish, lady friends, his parents and relatives. Here were notebooks in which Crosby recorded in close detail the most intimate aspects of his life. By checking his notebook entries against letters to his wife and mother and father, I soon learned that he was a reliable truth-teller; I could trust him. I also realized that his short life was so amply documented that it left little to surmise, save the ruling question of his life: his death.

I resolved to take advantage of this documentation to the fullest, weaving the raw facts of his history through my text as artfully as I knew how, using the dialogue he had so thoughtfully preserved. I had no wish to be accused of having “novelized” my biography, and I knew that without supporting apparatus to identify the sources of the data I presented, I would not, should not, be taken on faith. Whenever a bit is taken from here and another bit from there, sometimes in violation of chronology, the synthesis is partial, even tendentious, and I wanted my readers to have access to the exact parts that comprise *Black Sun*’s whole, calling for generous citation. I chose to place notes at the back of the book to free my narrative of cluttering justifications and attributions.

The following passage from page 278 of *Black Sun* gives a sense of

the kind of narrative synthesis biography might employ. Here, for the sake of illustration, I identify with intrusive footnotes where the scraps came from:

The day before Harry, Caresse and Constance sailed for New York on the *Mauretania*, the Crosbys had some people to tea at 19 rue de Lille: Ambassador Joseph Grew, Alex and Sylvia Steinert, the Crouchers, Goops and a few others.<sup>1</sup> The next afternoon, November 16, several of these, together with Eugene Jolas, saw them off with a party on the railway platform in Paris.<sup>2</sup> As soon as they boarded at Cherbourg, a telegram was delivered to Harry. The message was terse—YES—but to him not cryptic. It was signed by the Sorceress.<sup>3</sup> Three days later, sitting with Constance in the smoking room during a storm<sup>4</sup>—both at sea and with Caresse, who was sulking in her stateroom, jealous of Constance<sup>5</sup>—and reading *Beating the Stock Market*,<sup>6</sup> he was brought another radiogram.

“I guess this must be from my girl in Boston,” he told Constance.

“Oh, Harry,” she said, “I do hope you aren’t going to get mixed up with that girl again. She’s married, and you aren’t really in love with her anyway.”

“I love three people,” he replied. “Caresse, you, and Josephine.”<sup>7</sup>

1. The names of the Crosbys’ visitors, and the fact that there was such a party, came from a guest book among papers at Southern Illinois University.
2. I know that Eugene Jolas said goodbye to the Crosbys from his unpublished memoir, which his widow let me read in Paris.
3. The telegram from “the Sorceress” is among Crosby’s papers, at Brown University, and I surmise that it was delivered in person to Harry by an instruction on the envelope: “Deliver to stateroom.”
4. That there was a violent storm during their passage I learned from New York newspapers on microfilm in the annex of the New York Public Library.
5. That Caresse sulked, jealous, in her stateroom while Crosby passed time with Constance, I learned from *Shadows of the Sun*.
6. That Crosby was reading *Beating the Stock Market* during the afternoon this second telegram was delivered I learned from his meticulously annotated reading record, among his papers at Southern Illinois University.
7. The conversation between Harry and Constance was duplicated in a letter from Constance to Caresse following Harry’s suicide.

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In addition to twenty-eight pages of notes, an annotated bibliography and a chronology (which liberated me to move back and forth through the text in time, following where topics rather than the calendar led), I included an index, so that readers could locate the “major” figures who intersected my minor subject. I interviewed as many people as I could find (and would talk with me), but not until I had soaked myself in Crosby’s documents. More than forty years had passed since his death, and the people I interviewed were called upon to reach back in memory more than half a century. A few had astounding recall: Edward Weeks and Archibald MacLeish could attach episodes to dates accurate within a tolerance of a week or two. But for the most part the utility of these interviews was to observe in which ways memory had altered Crosby into a figure of legend or derision, to watch the critical faculty seep through the compost pile of all those years. Finally, when I caught myself giving rather than taking information, when I spent more time telling Crosby’s friends and kinsmen what they *really* knew about him than asking what they knew, it was time to go home and begin writing.

The book I wrote after *Black Sun*, titled *The Duke of Deception*, is . . . what? Biography, sort of. Autobiography, I guess. On its account I stopped asking questions and began writing, not because I finally knew all I could know, but because there was so little really to know. That book is about my father—Arthur “Duke” Wolff—a “minor” subject if ever there was one, but a major father to me. He is remembered, and not fondly, by hornswoggled bankers, unpaid merchants, and police and prison officers of the four quadrants of the United States. And by me. He died before my children met him, and the book I have written about him, and my childhood with him, is for them.

Like *Black Sun*, *The Duke of Deception* begins with its subject’s end. These are minor characters, after all, and to begin with their beginnings, with births, would beg much of a reader’s patience. More important, I don’t like books that tease, and I have tried to tell stories whose suspense is of character rather than episode: *Here’s what Harry Crosby did; let me try to show why.*

What Crosby said he’d do he did, exactly, which is why he interests me. What my father said he had done, he had not done. I grew up in a family in which much was suggested and little was explained, in which misapprehensions were exploited, lovingly manured. My father was a Jew, and said he was not. My father said he was a Groton and Yale and Skull & Bones man, and he was not. My father said he had inherited a

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huge fortune, but he did not. Everything that mattered most to me I learned late, and in a rush. And that is how I learned that my father would not live forever.

When I turned twenty-one my father gave me a heavy gold signet ring that he said had been in our family many years. In fact, the ring had been fabricated according to his design in Hollywood and had never been paid for. Beneath lions rampant on a field of fleurs-de-lis is a motto, engraved backwards to come out right on a red wax seal. It says *NULLA VESTIGIUM RETORSIT*, and my father told me this means *don't look back*. In fact it means, if it means anything, *not a trace left behind*.

Well, I'm left behind, and my sons and my elder son's son are left behind. And the only way I knew to deal with that intractable fact was to write about it, to write about my father for my sons. I have been writing about him since I began to write, at first in anger. By the time I began *The Duke of Deception* the anger seemed mostly to have dissipated. My father left many victims, and for a long time I numbered myself among them. I was ashamed of him, and detested the lies he had told me, especially the lie he had told most insistently, that only "truth can set us free, that the only way we could confirm our love for each other was to tell each other the truth."

I decided, when my father died, that only my attempt to tell the truth could convey to my children the experience of having been my father's son, and that it was important that they have a record of that experience. I was mindful, and am more mindful now, that the truth, as it is regarded by scientists and philosophers, is beyond my reach. I was nurtured by lies about my history, and some of these can never be unraveled. Memory is selective, and the iron principle of life as well as narrative is the partiality of point of view.

I knew as little about the facts of my father's history when I began as I had known of the facts of Harry Crosby's, and when I was finished I had fewer facts about him than about Crosby. I began with the conviction that lives can be revealed only by their enactments, a conviction deepened by my experience of Harry Crosby. I would not put my father on the couch, pretend to fathom his motives. I would instead reveal his comings and goings, his doings. As I could not with Crosby, I would try to give the sense of him, how he filled space in a room, the key and range and timbre of his speech, his smell of leather and tobacco and silver polish.

I knew by now, having anatomized Harry Crosby's will to change himself from one kind of character to another, that a mask is often more interesting than the "authentic" character it disguises, and I felt pre-

pared to give my father his givens, to judge them as I had tried to judge Crosby's suicide, aesthetically as well as morally. In plain words, I was less interested in what my father *was*, in whether he was in fact a Skull & Bones man, than in what he wished people to believe he was.

Given my interest, how can I concern myself with the world's judgment of major and minor subjects? Surely we know enough to realize that celebrity cannot enhance an autobiographer's claim to a reader's attention. In the kind of book it has been my ambition to write, the work itself stands as the writer's bid for a place in the world, as the writer's subject's bid for a place in the world. If I have done my work well someone will say, reading it, *I wish I had known that Duke*, by which the reader will mean not that he would have liked to have met a Skull & Bones man, but that he would have liked to hear my father lie about being a Skull & Bones man.

Narrative demands calculation and proportion, and the critical faculty that drives any comely narrative insists that character—if it is to connect, if it has the hope of connecting—be born into the narrative as into the world, selfish, but not alone. Character in narrative is interesting only in relation to other characters in narrative. The ubiquitous “I” may in fact be a solipsist, but his effect on others must be registered, and the effect on him of others, too. Children think of themselves as alone in the world. At least I did; narrative restored my case to its deeper reality, a process of strophe and antistrophe, commerce, community, a family, the annihilation of such modifying titles as “major” and “minor.”

William Gass has located the peril at the heart of autobiography, and it is only a more extreme instance of the tunnel vision of biography, the insane sense that one alone counts: “The lively force and narcissistic drama of one's situation, like a passion or a toothache for which the world shuts shop, so only one's wound is open, only one's pain is beating, easily leads to the conviction that the rush of lust through the loins, the ache, the ear which won't stop ringing, are universal conditions of consciousness. . . .”

So, with Auden, one hopes that one's case will touch others. But how to connect? Not by calculation, I think, not by the assumption that in the pain of my toothache, or my father's, or Harry Crosby's, or more recently John O'Hara's, I have discovered a “universal condition of consciousness.” One may merely know that no character is unaccompanied and hope that a singular story, as every honest story is singular, will in the magic way of some things apply, connect, resonate, touch a major chord.